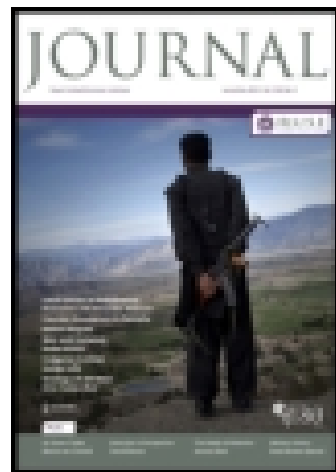




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On Absolute War

Chris Bellamy

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My book *Absolute War* tells of Russia's great resilience, and how it bounced back from the jaws of destruction. How appropriate, perhaps: in the last couple of years we have seen Russia, given leverage by its immense energy resources, reassert its power and influence. Russia will not likely ever again be a 'peer competitor' with the United States – that role will fall to China and India – but, like the UK, it will remain a significant player on the world stage. Like the UK thirty years before, it is coming to terms with a post-imperial role. It will remain, as ever, a country of extremes, with a flamboyant, wild and erratic genius.

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John Erickson had told the story of the 1941-45 war in two magisterial volumes – *The Road to Stalingrad* (1975) and *The Road to Berlin* (1983). This book was to be about Russia in the Second World War, and therefore also to include the long period – nearly two years, from 23 August 1939 to 22 June 1941 – when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were almost Allies, and the 1939-40 Winter War with Finland. Erickson had covered that in his earlier volume, *The Soviet High Command*.

There are many aspects of the Soviet wartime experience with lessons for a wide range of contemporary problems. It touches on homeland security and

resilience and for inter-agency co-operation, especially the Red Army and the Interior Ministry (NKVD) and non-military organisations. There was also both symmetric *and* asymmetric conflict. Some people assume the conflict was exclusively Panzer divisions versus tank corps and major conventional operations. A great deal can be learnt from the interaction of Soviet regular forces with pro-Soviet partisans, and Soviet and German anti-partisan operations. Many did not recognise the Russians as 'liberators': a front commander, Vatutin, fell victim to an attack by anti-Soviet Ukrainian partisans.

Then there is also the potential conflict between considerations of national security and the human security of the state's inhabitants. Human and civil rights had never been a Soviet priority and the regime actually became more repressive during the war. Yet the underlying questions are relevant for us today, in our society. There are also environmental lessons. As twenty-first century security studies scholars, we need to look at the effect of war on the environment and the environment as a tool of – or a major factor in – war. Finally, there is also the role of women. The Soviet Union made more use of women in front-line combat roles than any other combatant, although the moment the war ended they were discharged and encouraged to return home.

Absolute War references Clausewitz, who refers to the interaction between combatants where each tries to out-do the other in terms of speed and aggression, thus creating a process of escalation leading, in theory, to an extreme or absolute. This was the case



A reconstruction of the raising of the Soviet flag over the Reichstag. The flag was raised on the night of 30 April 1945. This iconic reconstruction took place on 2 May.

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throughout the whole Second World War, but applied particularly on the Eastern Front, where both sides were determined to destroy the other's political existence and where such niceties as the 1929 Geneva Conventions

did not apply. Because the Soviet Union had not signed them, the Germans did not feel obliged to respect them either. But as well as being an absolute war, it was also a total war, involving the whole of society. The Soviet Union's economy and people were mobilised to a higher degree than any other combatant.

New sources were available to Western scholars even before the end of the Soviet period, under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness), but after the reunification of Germany in 1990 and the splitting up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 there was a flood of documents, which cascaded through the 1990s. However, in 1999, with the NATO attacks on Serbia and after President Putin's accession in 2000 access to archives, certainly for foreigners, was restricted again. Fortunately, numerous collections of Russian archival documents covering the entire period of the war were published, in collections expertly edited by large teams of researchers. Most of these

collections have not been translated. Perhaps the jewel in the crown is the collection of six books of documents from the Federal Security Service (FSB, formerly the KGB, MGB, NKVD and NKGB) archives, published between 1995 and 2003. However, these only cover up to the end of 1942.¹

The Soviet Union's economy and people were mobilised to a higher degree than any other combatant

Other useful volumes contain documents from the State Defence Committee (GKO), including Stalin's Kremlin appointments diary for the entire war.² Diaries are of great value to historians. There has been speculation that in the ten days after the shock of the German attack on 22 June 1941



Young Soviet soldier, a member of the pre-war army destroyed by the Germans in 1941.

Stalin suffered from some form of nervous breakdown, but his appointments schedule suggests the opposite. On 27 June, for example, he had thirty appointments with senior ministers and military commanders.³ Later in the war, Stalin found time to see all kinds of interesting people. In autumn 1941 a young tank commander sergeant was wounded – badly burned – in the Vyaz'ma encirclement battle. He was evacuated and spent six months recovering in hospital in Siberia. In a system which so often sacrificed its own people so ruthlessly, the care, attention and resources which could be devoted to bringing a wounded tank commander back to health seem extraordinary. While in hospital, he doodled, recalling his interest in designing gadgets and guns. His energy and originality attracted attention. On 23 September 1942, there is an entry in Stalin's diary. At 21:30 the 'Boss' saw the tank sergeant for five minutes. His name? Mikhail Kalashnikov, billed as a 'designer of small arms'. He became the designer of the most rugged and popular series of small arms ever made.

This story underlines a striking counter-intuitive point about the Soviet system. In spite of its arbitrariness, its unfairness and its apparent disregard for the individual, it often picked exactly the

right person at the right time. Kalashnikov was one example. Another, also from 1942, was the selection of forty-year old Igor Kurchatov, to head the Soviet nuclear programme.⁴

But its centralisation meant that this was not always the case: Stalin, for example, refused to believe Hitler was planning to attack him and appears to have been in a state of denial as intelligence reports of German preparations came in. The most chilling

Russia's great strategic depth was crucial

indicator of Stalin's state of mind was his response to a report from agent 'Starshina' (Harro Schulze Boysen), a Luftwaffe lieutenant working in the German Air Ministry. The photograph of the document, under a cover sheet dated 17 June – less than four days before Barbarossa's 0330 H-Hour on 22 June 1941 – is fascinating. Because intelligence sources and methods are involved, the typist has left the sources blank and they have been filled in subsequently in manuscript. Even the State Security Commissariat (NKGB)'s senior typists were not cleared to this level. The agent says that all German

military preparations for an armed offensive against the Soviet Union are complete and the blow can be expected at any time. The head of the NKGB, Vsevolod Merkulov, has forwarded it to Stalin. Stalin has scribbled in green coloured pencil,

you can tell your 'source' in the German Air Ministry that he can go fuck his mother. This is not a source, but a disinformant. I.St.⁵

From this, the historian may deduce, not unreasonably, that this was not what Stalin wanted to hear. Three days later, the NKGB compiled a 'calendar' – a dossier – of no fewer than forty-one reports that a German attack was imminent. What would one do as Merkulov? He decided not to pass it on, despite its clear veracity. This is a key reminder of a crucial problem in the dissemination phase of the intelligence cycle – the difficulty of telling the boss what he does not want to hear.

There remain a number of key debates and controversies still surrounding the Soviet wartime experience. Of these, perhaps the most intriguing was Viktor Suvorov's thesis that when Hitler attacked Stalin, Stalin was on the point of attacking him. Suvorov's thesis was first published in the *RUSI Journal* in June 1985. However, although Suvorov's thesis is persuasive, all the evidence is circumstantial and *Absolute War's* conclusion is that Stalin was probably not planning to attack Hitler until 1942. Another valuable new source is the unexpurgated memoirs of Marshal Rokossovskiy, probably the best Soviet commander of the war, published in their complete uncensored form in 2002. In a passage which had been cut by the Soviet censor, Rokossovskiy recalls how his sealed written orders assumed that his IX Mechanised Corps was a fully equipped, honed strike force. In fact, it had only half the complement of personnel and 30 per cent of its fighting vehicles, and there was 'no way the Kiev Military District and General staff didn't know this'.⁶ Clearly, something was very odd.

There definitely was a plan for a pre-emptive strike, because we know Zhukov

signed it off on 15 May 1941, five weeks before the German attack. The plan for a strike against German forces in the General Government area of Poland was published in the Soviet journal *Communist of the Armed Forces* in 1990.⁷ However, the fact that a military command has a plan is no proof that it has any intent or political will to implement it immediately.

The size of the theatre had an immense impact on the course and nature of the war. Europe is shaped like a funnel. So a force of 400 divisions – about the size of the two sides on the Eastern Front – crammed into northern France and the Low Countries might create stalemate, as happened in 1914–18. In the east, on the other hand, the country expands and the same size force distributed across the eastern front still leaves huge gaps, permitting manoeuvre.⁸ Russia's great strategic depth was also crucial. On 27 June 1941, the Politburo ordered the evacuation of all the treasures from the museums of Moscow and Leningrad, including the Kremlin armouries, to Chelyabinsk and Sverdlovsk, beyond the Urals. But this was not just to preserve artistic and cultural heritage. The Finance Ministry was ordered to make an estimate of the consignments' value in terms of jewels, bullion and scrap.⁹ This was the hard currency, the collateral, which a nation down on its uppers needs to raise foreign loans and keep fighting.

The NKVD have often been derided as 'secret police', but the documents reveal that they were a highly professional security organisation

To co-ordinate the defence of the country and bring together the work of all the different ministries, a 'war cabinet' was created – the GKO. Its first decree was published on 1 July 1941. That is a fascinating insight into what national security is really about. What



General, later Marshal, Konstantin Rokossovskiy. Probably the best Russian commander of the war, known as 'the dagger' by the Germans.

did it relate to? To boots for the Army? To radios? To the Interior Ministry forces? No. It ordered an increase in the rate of production of fire engines for the Moscow fire service.¹⁰ But that should not really be a surprise. The Germans would bomb Moscow, and there would be fires. And to relate to our era: who were the first people in to deal with the results of the Al-Qa'ida attacks on 9/11? The fire-fighters.

The role of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in the war is of particular interest as we focus more than we did a few years ago on homeland security and resilience. The NKVD have often been derided as 'secret police' and so on, but the documents reveal that they were a highly professional security organisation and that their armed formations were probably better trained and disciplined than the Red Army. This should not be surprising. The first Soviet forces the Germans met were the NKVD border guards, not the Red Army, and the prolonged resistance of Brest fortress, standing like a rock as the German torrent flooded past, may have been due to a strong NKVD presence. On several occasions the political authorities demanded large-scale arrests and the NKVD professionals stood up to them. One NKVD officer in the Caucasus said

he would take a very dim view of people who arrested citizens without evidence. The Politburo said it had intelligence that there were numerous saboteurs and 'wreckers' among the Volga ethnic German population, but the NKVD said they were behaving themselves perfectly well.¹¹

This is a reminder that in our current security environment, we should not overreact and sleep-walk into a surveillance society, letting go of our hard-earned freedoms

Perhaps the finest example of the need not to overreact to threats to national security comes from the Siege of Leningrad. On 9 January 1942, eighty copies of a handwritten leaflet denouncing the Leningrad leadership were found at the city's Moscow railway station. They were signed by someone calling himself 'the rebel'. He kept up an output of leaflets and letters to the city's leaders. He was dangerous and had to be



Suspected collaborators being detained by the NKVD. Lessons for our own times.

caught. But the NKVD did not overreact and arrest the wrong people. After twenty months of careful police work, including handwriting checks on one-fifth of the surviving population of the city, psychological profiling and other professional policing techniques, he was caught.¹² This is a reminder that in our current security environment, we should not overreact and sleep-walk into a surveillance society, letting go of our hard-earned freedoms.

The war took Russia from a 'pariah state' and turned it into a space-bound superpower

In 1942 British Intelligence was assessing what needed to be done in the event of Russian collapse. By 1944, the British Foreign Office assessed that Russia would emerge from the war as the strongest land power, one of the three strongest air powers, the heir to the old, Imperial Russia, and the very successful exponent of a new political and economic system.¹³ Although we now

know the latter was fatally flawed, it did not seem that way to everyone in 1945. The war took Russia from a 'pariah state' and turned it into a space-bound superpower, a position it retained for forty years.

The cost was stupendous. By the end of 1941, Soviet Russia had lost forces – killed, and prisoners who did not return ('irrecoverable losses') – equivalent to the entire pre-war army. In 1942, it lost the same again: the Red Army was effectively destroyed twice over. In 1943, a third army came into being, and that was the one that went to Berlin. During the war, 30 million people were mobilised. The irrecoverable losses of the Soviet armed forces, NKVD and other security agencies totalled 8,668,400, as against three million German military casualties. But far more Soviet civilians died. Overall, the direct deaths attributable to the war are estimated at 27 million Soviets and four million Germans. But if you take the 1939 census and the population as it should have been, had the war not happened, then the difference is 49 million. Another 20 million were not born, because fathers and mothers never met.¹⁴ The terrifying statistics give added poignancy

to the words of the Leningrad poetess Olga Berggolts, etched on every Russian war memorial. '*Nikto ne zabyt, nichto ne zabyto*': No-one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten.¹⁵

It is hoped that this book, *Absolute War*, will help ensure no-one and nothing is forgotten. That includes not just people and events, but lessons for national and international security and resilience, and the moral, physical and conceptual components of fighting power. ■

NOTES

- 1 Lt Gen Sergei Vadimovich Stepashin, (ed.), *Organy Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voyny. Sbornik dokumentov.* (Organs of State Security of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War. A collection of documents) FSB Archives 1939-end 1942. Published 1995-2003. Vol. 1 *On the Eve, 1939-41* (2 books); Vol. 2 *The Beginning – June-Dec 1941* (2 books); Vol. 3, Bk 1, *Breaking the Blitzkrieg Jan-June 1942*; Bk 2, *From Defence to Attack July-Dec 1942*.
- 2 Yri Gor'kov, *Gosudarstvennyy Komitet Obornoy Postanovlyayet 1941-45* (GKO Orders 1941-45) (Ol'ma Press: Moscow, 2002).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 4 Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. 484.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Fond 3, Opis 50, delo 415, 17 June 1941. *Absolute War*, plate 2.
- 6 Konstantin Rokossovskiy, *Soldatskiy dolg* (A Soldier's Duty), unexpurgated edition, (Ol'ma Press: Moscow, 2002), p. 30, cited in *Absolute War* p. 200.
- 7 Vladimir Karpov, *Marshaly Velikoy Otechestvennoy – Zhukov* (Marshals of the GPW – Zhukov), *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil*, 5/1990, pp. 62-8, details pp. 67-68. This prompted the author's first article as *Defence Correspondent of the Independent*, 'Stalin's plan to cripple Germany', *Saturday 14 April 1990*, p. 12.
- 8 *Absolute War*, plate 7.1, p. 167.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 284-86.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 380-81, 399-401.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 473-76, 686.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 408.